



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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March 31, 2014

By Capt. Brian Faltinson
Wisconsin National Guard Public Affairs

Wisconsin National Guard provides communications support in Alaska disaster exercise

VALDEZ, Alaska — A communications team from the Wisconsin National Guard's 128th Air Control Squadron, in conjunction with Valdez Emergency Management and National Guard units from other states, provided communications support in Valdez Saturday. The team set up a Joint Incident Site Communications Capability at the Alaska National Guard Armory in Valdez and provided communications support to the local emergency operations center and other National Guard units.

As part of the overall remembrance of the 1964 "Good Friday" earthquake, the 128th ACS's JISCC team participated in Exercise Alaska Shield and Vigilant Guard-Alaska 2014. VG-AK14 is a regional, tactically focused exercise and will have multiple interagency field-training exercises that are focused on the response and recovery from a major earthquake and tsunami. VG-AK14 is an exercise conducted to ensure the state of Alaska and the nation are prepared and ready to respond to catastrophic events.

The scenario in Valdez revolved around an earthquake and subsequent tsunami that caused significant damage and injured many residents to the point that the city required outside assistance, which included communications support after the disaster shut down all telephone and internet connectivity.

"Our mission in Valdez is to help this emergency operation center do its communications," said Senior Master Sgt. Charles Rydmark, the noncommissioned officer in charge of the 128th ACS team.

A JISCC is a robust, satellite-based communications system that serves as a switchboard between different communications platforms including telephone, internet, high-frequency radios and military radios.

"Our role as a JISCC team is to provide communication and networking support from one organization to another — either local, state, federal or military, including FEMA. During a natural disaster we link one type of communication with another," said Staff Sgt. Ryan Miller, Wisconsin National Guard, a JISCC operator with the 128th Air Control Squadron. "We set up antennas and satellite communications and talk across the world and provide telephone and internet support to the local emergency officials."

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Valdez's isolated location and risk of natural disaster made the VG-AK14 exercise an ideal training opportunity for the JISCC team.

"The scenario is very realistic because the facilities here in Valdez are very bare bones and they need the support to handle a major emergency," said Miller. "As a Guard member, it is important to be able to network with local communities and gain more experience working with them and our equipment."

Vigilant Guard is being conducted March 25 through April 2 in the communities of Anchorage, Matanuska Valley, Valdez, Fairbanks, Cordova and Kodiak.

The lengthy trip from Wisconsin to Valdez that utilized military aircraft, a military convoy and a six-hour ferry ride across Prince William Sound provided the JISCC team with an additional training opportunity.

"The exercise gave us the opportunity to pack up the equipment, put it on a pallet for airlift and deploy it to the field," said Maj. Jeannie Western, Wisconsin National Guard, JISCC liaison officer with the 128th Air Control Squadron. "Everything that we intended to do worked out. The local Valdez officials and JISCC team worked well together."

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Photo cutlines:

140329-Z-NN682-004

Airmen with the 128th Air Control Squadron, Wisconsin Air National Guard, monitor communications support provided by a Joint Incident Site Communications Capability (JISCC) located at the Valdez National Guard Armory during Exercises Alaska Shield and Vigilant Guard – Alaska 2014, March 29. VG-AK14 is a statewide exercise involving national, state and local agencies designed to test the response and coordination of different agencies in a disaster scenario modeled after the 1964 earthquake and subsequent tsunami that ravaged Alaska. U.S. Army National Guard photo by Capt. Brian Faltinson

140329-Z-NN682-088

Airman 1st Class Christian DeGuire with the 128th Air Control Squadron, Wisconsin Air National Guard, conducts communications checks on a Joint Incident Site Communications Capability (JISCC) located at the Valdez National Guard Armory during Exercises Alaska Shield and Vigilant Guard – Alaska 2014, March 29. VG-AK14 is a statewide exercise involving national, state and local agencies designed to test the response and coordination of different agencies in a disaster scenario modeled after the 1964 earthquake and subsequent tsunami that ravaged Alaska. U.S. Army National Guard photo by Capt. Brian Faltinson

140329-Z-NN682-407

Maj. Jeannie Western, 128th Air Control Squadron, Wisconsin Air National Guard, discusses operations with Command Sgt. Maj. Jeremy Miller with the 1-297th Reconnaissance & Surveillance Squadron, Alaska Army National Guard, in the Valdez Emergency Operations Center during Exercises Alaska Shield and Vigilant Guard – Alaska 2014, March 29. VG-AK14 is a statewide exercise involving national, state and local agencies designed to test the response and coordination of different agencies in a disaster scenario modeled after the 1964 earthquake and subsequent tsunami that ravaged Alaska. U.S. Army National Guard photo by Capt. Brian Faltinson